

(Washington, D.C.) - Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez (TX-23) applauded passage of H.R. 2095, the Federal Railroad Safety Improvement Act of 2007. H.R. 2095 takes a variety of steps to strengthen rail safety including updating the limits on rail workers' hours of service to reduce fatigue-related accidents, nearly doubling the number of safety inspectors, requiring new safety technologies on trains, and upgrading safety at rail tracks and crossings. The Federal Railroad Safety Improvement Act of 2007 passed the U.S. House of Representatives today by an overwhelming bipartisan majority, 377-38.

"San Antonio knows all too well the impact of weak and incomplete national rail safety standards on local communities," said Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez. "Earlier this year, I took part in a Congressional field hearing on rail safety in San Antonio where we heard first hand the many challenges facing the rail industry and need for vast improvements in operating procedures. We listened and today the House passed a bill that addresses many of the critical needs facing our national rail infrastructure, ensuring the safety of our neighborhoods and the security of our commerce by rail."

H.R. 2095 takes a variety of steps to strengthen rail safety, including requiring new safety technologies on trains, nearly doubling the number of safety inspectors, and upgrading safety at rail tracks and crossings.

Highlights of the bill include:

Overhauls of outdated hours-of-service laws for rail workers. About 40 percent of all train accidents are the result of human factors; one in four of those accidents result from fatigue, and yet it has been almost 40 years since the rail hours of service laws have been substantially revised. The bill overhauls the hours-of-service laws to ensure that railroad workers have adequate rest. The bill prohibits rail crews from working in excess of 12 hours. Currently, train crews can operate the train up to 432 hours per month - about twice the time of truck drivers and ship personnel -- the equivalent of 14 hours a day for each of the 30 days of the month. The bill also limits the railroads' use of "limbo time" - the time when the train crew's hours of service have expired but the crew has not arrived at home or their destination. Two years after the bill's enactment, an employee's limbo time would be limited to 10 hours per month (with the exception of certain unforeseen circumstances, such as an accident or derailment).

Mandates installation of improved safety technologies. The bill mandates implementation of positive train control technologies, such as automatic brake applications which are instrumental to preventing human factor-caused accidents, by December 31, 2014 and authorizes grants to assist railroads in implementing this requirement. The National Transportation Safety Board said that 52 rail accidents they investigated would have been prevented if these new technologies had been in place over the last decade.

Strengthens track safety. In 2006, track-related accidents surpassed human factor-related accidents as the leading category of all train accidents. The bill requires railroad carriers to increase inspections and manage the rail in their tracks so as to minimize accidents due to internal rail flaws.

Increases enforcement. A recent audit conducted by the Department of Transportation's Inspector General found that the Federal Government investigates only 13 percent of the most serious grade crossing collisions that occurred, while the Federal Aviation Administration conducted on-site investigations of 93 percent of accidents. The bill would nearly double the Federal safety inspectors (to 800 in 2011) that monitor the railroads' compliance with federally mandated safety standards. The legislation also would increase civil penalties for rail safety violations and criminal penalties for failing to file an accident report on time, and increases fines and penalties for railroads that violate Federal laws and regulations.

The bill now goes for passage by Senate and signature by the president.

Congressman Rodriguez serves as a Member of the House Committee on Appropriations.

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